



# VIVE LA RESSEMBLANCE! ON SOCIAL STRATEGIES FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND WEB COLLABORATION

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# **VIVE LA RESSEMBLANCE! ON SOCIAL STRATEGIES FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND WEBCOLLABORATION**

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**Abstract:** In applied linguistics, learning strategies are generally described according to cognitive approaches. In this perspective, cognitive and metacognitive strategies are considered to be the most important ones. This paper adopts an activity-based theoretical perspective moving away from the mainstream Input-Interaction-Output model that considers language learning as an individual cognitive process. We discuss the social and complexity dimension in language acquisition and language didactics and address the question of social strategies. In this ecological perspective, we are concerned above all with social actions. Social strategies in an action-based perspective come first. We therefore propose to flip Oxford's taxonomy on learning strategies.

## **1. Introduction**

The title of this communication is an acknowledgment of Rebecca Oxford's article "Vive la difference" (1988). It explicitly calls for a focus on collaborative learning and social networking and questions the notion of social strategies (Oxford 1990). Learning strategies are considered to be primarily cognitive and metacognitive (direct strategies) and concern the acquisition of linguistic contents. Social strategies, on the other hand, are considered to be indirect and related to communication. The CEFR (2001: 57) introduced a major change in the definition of strategy that has not really been taken into account. Mariani (2004: 35) explains that in an action-based perspective, in opposition to a knowledge-based perspective, strategies are related to the social context in which the action takes place and are not only related to language communication. This could imply a new way of considering Oxford's taxonomy. My main point is to adopt an activity-based theoretical perspective (Lantolf 2000), moving away from the mainstream Input-Interaction-Output model that considers language

learning as an individual cognitive process (Block 2003). How can we then consider the social dimension in language acquisition and didactics (Springer 2009; Huver and Springer 2011) and address the question of social strategies?

To begin with, I'll will present my personal ramblings on strategies; these general thoughts are intended to show different 'twists and turns' on strategies. I will then move on to focus on two different views on learning and on strategies. Finally, I will attempt to define social strategies in webcollaboration in a general way and propose to flip Oxford's taxonomy.

## **2. Personal ramblings on learning strategies**

We love to tell stories that look like us, that look like our own lives, with the usual twists and turns that life reserves for us. I believe that the research projects we have chosen are inspired by stories of our lives, by stories that look like us, by ideas we have on teaching and learning. Unfortunately, mainstream research demands that we leave aside this storytelling that explains who we are and why we see the world and education the way we do. Mainstream research (the scientific *doxa*) demands neutrality and a so-called objectivity. It forces us to tell ourselves stories about 'rational and objective' methods in human sciences. I am taking the liberty to stray from this fixed scientific path and present the twists and turns that enlightened my reflections on the question of strategies. This part will outline three different ways of looking at the question of learning strategies. First, pictures of school models of teaching, then contemporary artists representing our world as constellations, and lastly a Greek way of looking at strategies with Ulysses.

### ***2.1 Teaching past and present***

In a traditional class, lessons are teacher-centred, teacher-led; pupils are expected to learn the teaching content, i.e. lesson input, by heart. In this first context, we can say that the educational culture does not expect what we now call learning strategies in an active and reflective way. In the modern way of teaching, the communicative classroom for example, pupils are expected to be more active but even though pupils and teacher interact, we can imagine that these interactions are also teacher-led (stimulus, response, evaluation). This modern context of teaching nevertheless allows for strategy-oriented teaching. The definition of learning strategies that we know can be easily applied here (cognitive and even metacognitive strategies). The third context

can be described as collaborative learning enriched by ICT. In a collaborative class, the teacher stays in the background; he is the ‘guide on the side’ and not the ‘sage on the stage’ (King, 1993). Thus, with the help of the teacher and with online communication artefacts (as it happens with webcollaboration), pupils can build together new knowledge and competencies. In this different cultural educational environment, social and metacognitive strategies are of primary importance. The concept of learning strategies has therefore to be carefully handled as it all depends on educative contexts and other parameters. This is probably why many researchers call it a ‘fuzzy concept’.

## ***2.2 Artists’ representations of our new digital world***

Modern artists like Miró and Calder, and many others, have a unique way of depicting our world in new representations. This summer I went to an exhibition of some of Miró’s paintings in Sète, France. The paintings, called *Constellations*, give us a good idea of this new digital world and education. Everything is connected, there is no real beginning or end, no real linear interaction, but a multi dimensional interconnection. Calder’s mobile constellations are another way of depicting movement and the universe. He shows detached bodies with different shapes and colours floating and moving in space, some static and others moving. The world as movement and constellations can be compared to our web networks. We are now part of social networks; learning has become more and more socially interconnected. Everything we need is somewhere on the internet constellations. We develop different strategies to learn, and in this context social strategies are not indirect but direct, they are at the heart of the action we undertake on the internet. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008: 29) tried to explain why applied linguists should take complexity into account: “In a complex and dynamic system, everything changes all the time.” They add: “A system of human activity or development will be dynamic at each level of social or human organization, from the sociocultural, through the individual and down to the neural cellular”. In this complex and dynamic constellation, “language, language use, and language development are continuously in action”. This means that nothing is predetermined, nothing is stable. It therefore seems difficult to imagine and define stable and good learning strategies.

## ***2.3 Mètis and Ulysses: dolos and kairos and polytropos***

In my research story and scientific walk, I came across another important and new perspective: The story of Ulysses and Mètis. Intelligence and learning are not just a problem of *logos*, of rationality, of predefined and stable knowledge. Strategies in an action-based approach can be defined according to the CEFR as “a particular line of action in order to maximise effectiveness”. Ulysses is clever and can use many tricks, he is *polytropos* and uses cunning, *dolos*, and knows how to adapt to difficult and new situations, *kairos* (Detienne et Vernant 1993). In an action-based approach, what matters is effectiveness, even if one has to lie and defraud! Mètis-like strategies are necessary when faced with complexity or chaos. They are dynamic and original. One cannot predict or define what strategy could be the best for everyone in a particular situation. Mètis-like strategies depend on each individual, on the story of his/her experience acquired over the years. Many students do not succeed at school because they don't give priority to logos-like strategies that are favoured by education. Ulysses, like many pupils, would have been miserable and would have cheated to succeed at school!

Let me finish this part of my trip with Einstein's education and view on teaching. Many things have been said on Einstein's education that are still controversial, but let's admit they are true! Einstein was a brilliant pupil but he resented the school's methods of teaching. He learned a lot on his own and preferred imagination and creativity to rote learning. In this sense he was a failure according to the school's standards. He was probably described as a medium learner who didn't fit in and adapt to school's prescription. He didn't use the good learner's strategies. For Einstein, the only source of knowledge is experience.

These different twists and turns show that the notion of strategy is difficult to handle if we consider learning as a complex and social dynamic activity. There are no universal learning strategies if we see learning as part of life experience. Mètis-like strategies seem to be more appropriate in an action-based perspective of human activities. We focus our attention mainly on individual strategies but what about social strategies? The social dimension is as important as the individual and cognitive dimension.

### **3. The social dimension: Two perspectives on social strategies**

This second step is focusing on social strategies. I will quickly remind us of what is generally admitted as “Good language learner” and “Good practices”. I thought that it

would be interesting to present ecoethologists' views on social strategies. These two perspectives will then be compared.

### ***3.1 Good Language Learner (GLL) and Good Practice (GP)***

One of the main questions related to GLL and GP could be: What are the best attitudes to adopt to be efficient in general tasks and in language learning tasks? Literature on the GLL is mainly focused on the study of efficient attitudes in handling learning tasks and also on the description of the good learners' qualities and characteristics. Research therefore is on internal qualities of individual learners. It is a cognitive perspective related to the communicative methodology of the 80's. The underlying hypothesis is that teaching GLL strategies will help less efficient learners to be successful in language tasks.

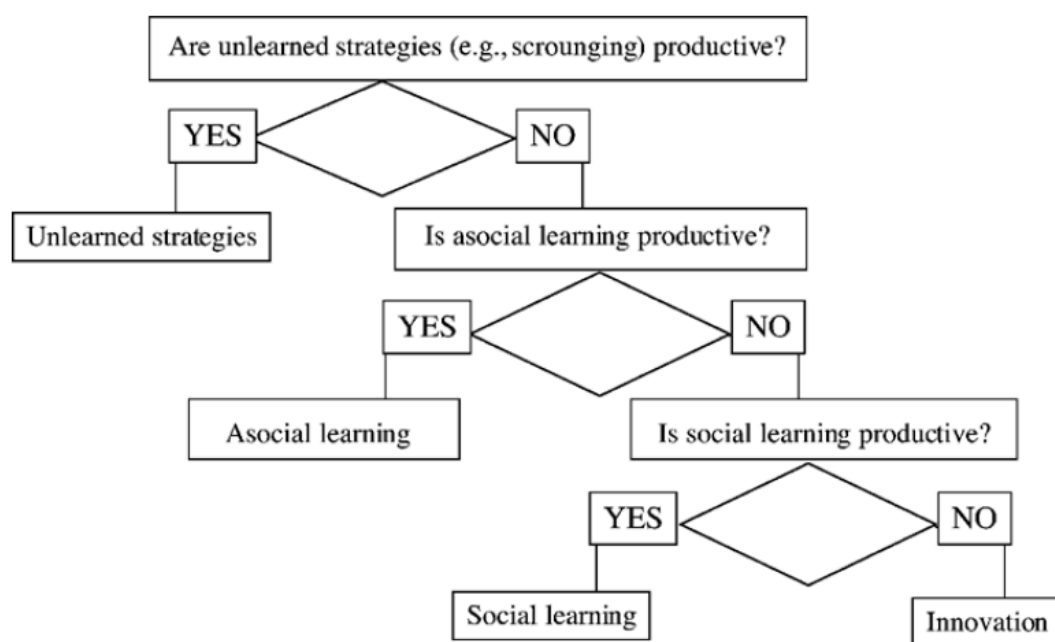
In applied linguistics, we have this well known taxonomy (Oxford 2003) with cognitive strategies which are necessary to manipulate the language content; cognitive strategies are direct and primary strategies; they are considered to be the most necessary for the learner to be efficient. Metacognitive strategies, also called self-regulation strategies (see for example Gavriilidou and Psaltou-Joycey 2010) are triggered when managing the learning process. They have an important effect on the cognitive strategies. In a sense to be cognitively efficient one needs to be conscious and reflect on the learning process. The last category is called social strategies. Obviously language learning has a lot to do with communication, with working with others and taking others' point of view into account, knowing the other. This obviously implies empathising and cooperating with peers, etc. This taxonomy therefore presents the attitudes learners need if they want to handle language learning tasks in an efficient way and be rewarded. For Oxford (2003: 14), social strategies are significant when pupils "work with others and understand the target culture as well as the language"; they have to ask questions for clarification and correction and communicate with proficient peers. This definition is therefore restricted to what is going on in a communicative language classroom.

### ***3.2 Social strategies as seen by ecoethologists (Laland 2004)***

Ecoethologists have a nice approach to our subject. They study animal behaviours, how they adapt and survive. Ecoethology is therefore the study of survival value of behaviours due to ecological pressure. Their main hypothesis is that animals (and

humans?) cooperate with each other in order to increase their own fitness and efficiency; learning from others is inherently adaptive. The research question could be: Who do they copy and when. In a way this is not so far from what we have said on imitating GLL/GP strategies.

Ecoethologists (Laland 2004) distinguish social strategies, strategies that are culturally transmitted, from asocial strategies that are new and not socially transmitted. Obviously developing new strategies can be very costly and risky for survival, but these scientists have been able to note such asocial strategies. We can say that most of the animals rely on social strategies because they are not risky and do not imply consuming a lot of energy. Individuals will therefore copy the majority, copy the successful individuals (what we could call the famous stars), copy their friends, etc. They can of course create asocial or unlearned strategies when established strategies are unsatisfactory or unproductive.



**Figure 1. Hierarchical control of behavioral strategies.**

Figure 1: Animal social behavioural strategies (from Laland 2004)

As we can see these strategies are very close to what humans do (see for example *Facebook*, *Tweeter* and other social networks). It is also important to stress that these strategies are necessary for reproduction and for survival. The pressure of the

environment is an important factor. But even for animals, unlearned strategies, asocial strategies and innovation are possible.

### ***3.3 The two perspectives compared: Individual cognitive perspective and collaborative ecological perspective***

We can compare these two perspectives on social strategies in this way:

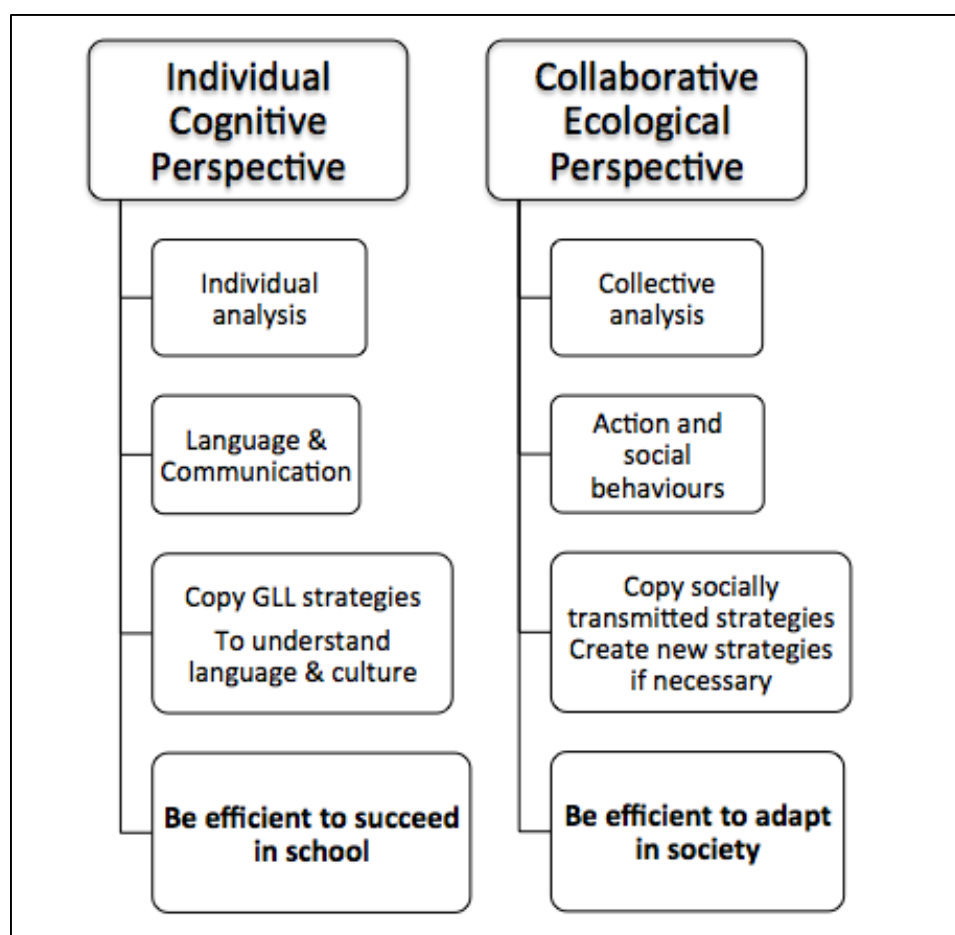


Figure 2: The two perspectives compared: Individual cognitive perspective and Collaborative ecological perspective (Springer 2014)

The individual cognitive perspective is most of all devoted to the study of what being efficient at school means. As applied linguists, we are concerned with language and communication learning. We believe therefore that imitating the GLL strategies will help less efficient learners to succeed at school. Socialising remains on an individual level as SLA research and language didactics are seldom related to collaborative learning. On the opposite, the collaborative ecological perspective is concerned with social actions and attitudes in a community; it is more about how to



behave, how to adapt in society. Language in this action-based perspective is considered as a medium and mediation, not as the ultimate aim. In a community, people imitate socially transmitted strategies that are supposed to help being efficient (most of the time transmitted by parents). They can also create new strategies when necessary or to be simply different. In real life, kids, and even adults, spend their time copying their favourite stars, the ‘buzz’ on *Youtube* or *Facebook*, etc. Are we any different from animals?

#### **4. Collaborative Learning and Webcollaboration: strategies in an action-based perspective**

SLA mainstream theory has recently been challenged by the necessity to take a ‘social turn’ and to open towards chaos and complexity approaches. The intrusion of technology and especially the social web has also questioned traditional ways of researching on language learning. Our interest in webcollaboration will give us the opportunity to re-question Oxford’s taxonomy on strategies and make some proposals.

##### ***4.1 Complexity and sociocultural theory in applied linguistics***

Block (2003) proposed an alternative approach to the input-interaction-output model of SLA that would take into account ‘the social turn’. Van Lier (2000) also insisted on the necessity to abandon the computer metaphor (input/output) and to adopt an ecological perspective in SLA. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) designed a complex systems approach for SLA in coherence with chaos/complexity theories in other disciplines. These contributions all agree that learning is a “non linear trajectory of development”, “a sociocognitive process in which the learner and the context interact” (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 254). This implies that we cannot disconnect the brain from the situated context where the educational activity takes place. Such terms as ‘constellation’ and ‘networking’ give us the idea that the ecological system is not stable and predetermined but dynamic: “A system roams across its landscape of possibility” (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 253).

Ellis (2008), in his analysis of sociocultural theory, highlights some points that are important for our action-based approach. Taking the learning situation in isolation does not seem to be a good idea as the learner is not like Robinson Crusoe, a lonely individual with a determined brain (Springer 2009).

Ellis explained that learning and acquisition occur in a dialogical action-based situation. According to sociocultural theory, social participation in a community triggers regulation, regulation by others and also self-regulation since the meaning of the exchange is co-built during the collaborative dialogue. For Ellis (2008: 526), “Acquisition occurs ‘in’ rather than ‘as a result of’ interaction, language learning is dialogically based”.

Springer (2009: 518) stressed the importance of collaborative learning:

“collaboration involves participation in group activities to accomplish a shared goal with others. It anchors the activity/learning in a social context of solidarity and understanding in a real communicative action. In a sociocultural perspective there is a real respect and concern for others as the construction of knowledge, of experience is shared. Learning is thus seen as participation in a social process of knowledge construction, social transformation of individuals and their environment. The community, as a whole, contributes to the achievement of the desired results”.

Vicarious learning comes in naturally; copying the others (imitation) can be a kind of “creative, transformative activity” according to Vygotsky (Ellis, 2008: 534). Imitation occurs in collaboration activities and enables learning to become development (internalisation). Learners develop with the mediation of others (and of technological artefacts) through language and action. As learning and acting are dynamic activities, teachers cannot define a task that would predetermine what learners will learn. Learners collaboratively negotiate the possible meanings of a task. “Tasks cannot predetermine what learners learn because learning depends heavily on the significance individuals assign to the various activities they participate in” (Ellis 2008: 547). Bandura (1997) showed the importance of the belief in self-efficacy. Successes in social or individual experiences help building a strong self-efficacy belief. Vicarious experiences, seeing people, similar to oneself, succeed, also strengthen self-efficacy belief and motivation. Social learning therefore permits adaptive benefits for learners thanks to optimistic beliefs in self-esteem and self-efficacy. These sociocultural and ecological assumptions are similar to ecoethologists descriptions of adaptive behaviours.

#### ***4.2 Social Web and Webcollaboration: theoretical construct***

We have seen that learning has a lot to do with participating and collaborating in social activities. Individual cognitive processes develop in a social environment. The media era has now been replaced by the social web era. Web 2.0 technologies are rapidly shaping our ways of learning, exchanging and acting. Young people are living in an open digital world; they are members of different social networks and have become familiar with new ways of thinking and writing; they engage themselves in different speech communities and learn different social norms, different web etiquettes. Social networking artefacts develop different forms of communication, of socialisation. The web is obviously a sociocultural and complex system, a complex constellation. Computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) has become an important part of computer mediated communication research in SLA. The notion of community, the relationship between the members of the community, the social participation of members to develop and reinforce the community, the shared tasks and projects are important elements for CSCL. Wenger (2005) defined what constitutes a community of practice: joint project, mutual engagement, shared repertoire and shared social practices.

In this new context, learning is action-based and collaborative: We learn with and thanks to the other members of the community. Learning is also distributed and in connection to others, intelligence is not only individual but also interconnected (Downes 2012). Dialogic interactions (synchronic and asynchronous) enable learners to build a learning community, to take an active part in the project, to be responsible social actors. The focus is on collaborative dialogue, situated participation, self and co-regulation, creative activity, not on predefined input, teacher controlled strategies and output. Collaboration implies that communication, action and learning are intimately linked and not separated (Dewey, learning by doing, 1916). Evaluation is also socially constructed, socially situated (not standardised).

Webcollaboration is based on this theoretical construct. For O'Dowd and Waire (2009), telecollaboration uses web communication tools to enable distant classes to develop linguistic skills and intercultural competence through a task-based approach. Their definition therefore restricts learning to communicative and intercultural skills. They do not take into account the importance of community, collaborative intelligence and joint construction of competencies. Springer (2014) offers another approach, which he calls webcollaboration, that is part of an educational project and aims to enable remote classes to collaboratively build a project (a complex social task,

Springer 2009). Students are social actors and together they create a ‘masterpiece’; through this process in action, they learn how to act and live together an interdisciplinary learning experience. This experience allows them to develop transversal, social, personal, intercultural, and language competencies. Socialisation through different artefacts (not only language) is at the heart of webcollaboration and networking. Coste (2006: 45) explains clearly what the action-based approach of the CEFR means:

“The action-based dynamic, related with the resources and capabilities of the actor, appears in the central articulation between tasks and strategies and manifests itself in the choice that consists in not reducing the notion of task to communicative task as well as the concept of strategy to communication strategy and learning strategy. It will also be noted that this extension implies that the strategic component, in this overall design, is somehow derived from the communicative competence to operate as a strategic execution of tasks, other than language, to a more general level action”.

For webcollaboration, tasks are more than simply communicative activities; strategies are also of a more general nature than language learning strategies.

#### ***4.3 Webcollaboration: Strategies in an action-based perspective***

To illustrate webcollaboration and strategies in an action-based perspective, I will rely on one of my doctorate students’ thesis (Koenig-Wisnieska 2011). She nicely contrasts a learner-oriented communicative task to a co-learner-oriented collaborative social task.

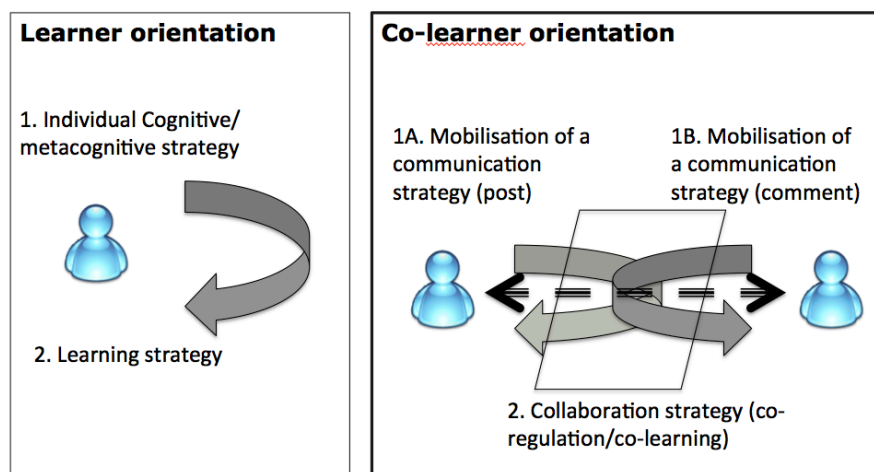


Figure 3: Learner orientation and Co-learner orientation (Koenig-Wisniewska 2011)

In an ecological action-based perspective, such as this webcollaboration project, the orientation is on the co-learners and on the community. They have to mobilise communicative resources to write and send a post, and for others to read, write and send a comment. What is important is how and what they are able to construct together. They do not only have to be linguistically efficient but also to be socially efficient if they want to solve a problem or realise their common task. Collaboration strategy is somehow similar to Oxford's definition of social strategies: asking questions, cooperating with others and empathising with others. But in an action-based perspective, collaboration strategies are at the heart of action; they cannot be indirect, second-hand. A collaborative interaction is not exactly a communicative interaction in the usual sense; we prefer to call it "collaborative dialogue" (Voloshinov 1929/2010; Swain 2000; Longuet 2012) to stress the "task in process" (Ellis 2008: 547). This collaborative dialogue is also an "intercultural dialogue" (Springer 2008).

In a webcollaboration project, learners mobilise collaborative strategies we could call "interstrategies" (Koenig-Wisniewska 2011) to collaboratively accomplish a social task. Learning develops, in Koenig-Wisniewska's example, in the act of blogging; it is not reduced to a class learning activity based on a comprehensible input and on the reproduction of a written template. Learning and collaboration go hand in hand. What matters most is the design process and accomplishment of the social task, and the socialisation and development of oneself thanks to multiple and interconnected collaborative dialogues.

An open scenario is therefore necessary to avoid predetermined learning tasks where learners simply have to reproduce comprehensible input. Webcollaboration can therefore enable classes to participate in rich social learning experiences. It is through this type of social activity that learners develop cognitive and metacognitive strategies: "It is also through the diversity of learning experiences, provided they are not compartmentalised nor strictly repetitive, that the individual extends his/her ability to learn" (CEFR 2001: 13).

We can consider blogging as an interactive written discourse genre. It enhances open public writing in the form of a polylog. The main point is the social action not the correct use of language contents. Socialisation of the partners through the collaborative action and collaborative dialogue is a major factor. Learners as social actors participate

in learning and collaboration experience online. If many learners are active and take full advantage of the experience, quite a lot are also passive and simple observers. But in this digital learning environment vicarious learning can develop even though it remains hidden. Vicarious learning is a basic way of learning and developing at the lowest cost as we have seen in the example of ecoethology. In this environment learners can use the action/cooperation/social strategies of their friends, of the majority, of the leaders, and when they feel more comfortable, they can take risks and contribute to the development of the project. For the CEFR (2001: 35), discourse competence is characteristic of advanced levels:

“This new degree of discourse competence shows itself in conversational management (co-operating strategies): give feedback on and follow up statements and inferences by other speakers and so help the development of the discussion; relate own contribution skilfully to those of other speakers”.

But in fact, in an action-based perspective learners, very early, have to develop this type of discourse/dialogic competence.

## **5. Conclusion**

We have shown that collaboration strategies come first and allow for the development of cognitive/metacognitive strategies. Therefore we propose to reverse/flip Oxford's taxonomy. The inter- or co-strategies we have described are as follows: Action based strategies, dialogic strategies and social strategies. Action-based strategies are at the most general level of activity; they are mètys-like strategies and are necessary to help the community to reach the joint objective. Dialogic strategies are more than interaction strategies or communication strategies; they constitute inter-mediation strategies necessary to jointly construct and develop the task in process; they also constitute inter-regulation/metacognitive strategies. Social strategies are not only necessary to develop an intercultural dialogue; they help to empower individual members, to give them a positive image of their self-efficacy; social strategies enable learners to observe and imitate other peers, to eventually take a calculated risk. In Oxford's taxonomy, metacognitive and affective strategies are individual-oriented; in an action-based perspective they are collaboratively developed. Indirect strategies become therefore direct strategies in an action-based perspective.

# Strategies in an action based perspective

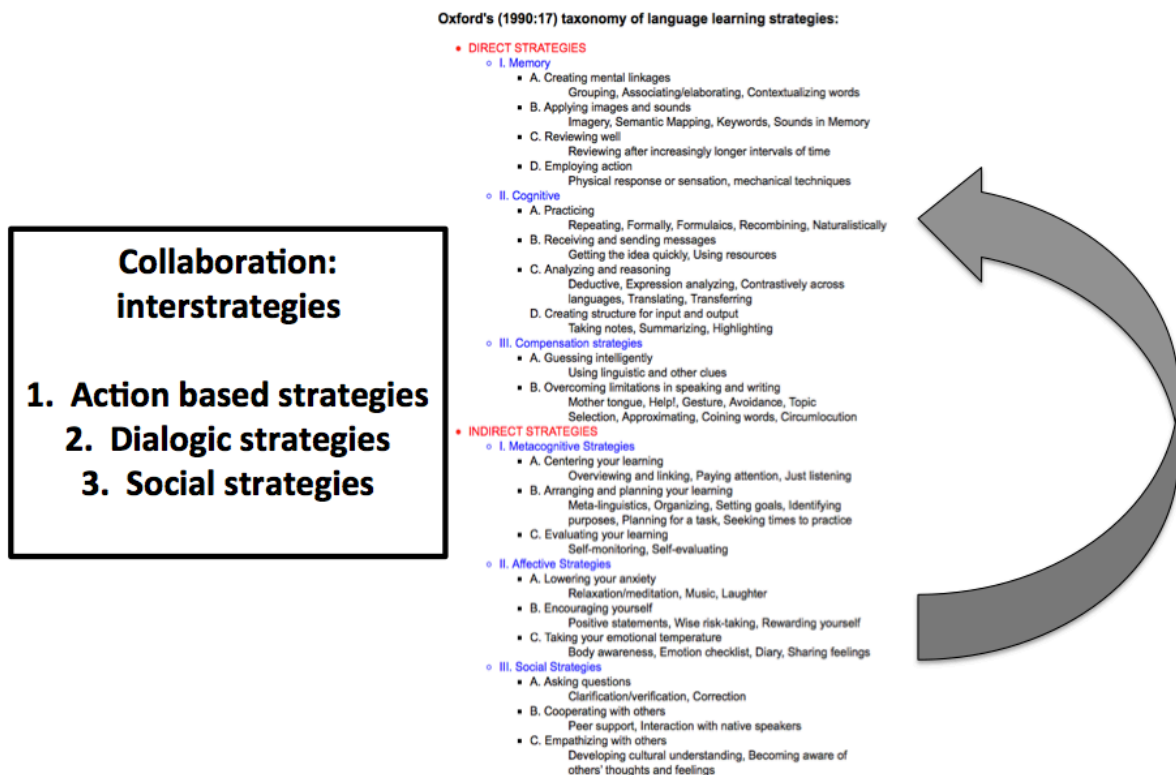


Figure 4: Strategies in an action-based perspective (Springer 2014)

This flipped taxonomy must of course correspond to a change in pedagogy and related to our new social web era!

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